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"I Am Thy Father's Ghost": A Journey Into Rupert Murdoch's Soul

By Alexander Cockburn

It has been astounding that a world-scale monster such as Rupert Murdoch has thus far fared well at the hands of his various profilists and biographers. Criticisms of him have either been too broadbrush to be useful, or too tempered with Waugh-derived facetiousness about press barons. Murdoch is far too fearsome an affront to any civilized values to escape with mere facetiousness.

Now at last Murdoch is properly burdened with the chronicler he deserves. The Murdoch Archipelago, (just published by Simon and Schuster in the UK) is written by Bruce Page, a distinguished, Australian-raised journalist who has lived and worked in England for many years, perhaps best known for his work in leading one of the great investigative enterprises of twentieth century journalism, the Insight team at the (pre-Murdoch) London Sunday Times.

As an essay in understanding what the function of the press should be in a democratic society, Page's book is an important one, focused on one of the world's leading villains, who controls such properties as Fox in the US, huge slices of the press in the UK and Australia, a tv operation in the Chinese Peoples Republic.

I had some brief and vivid personal encounters with Murdoch in the late 1970s at the Village Voice and I've known Page for many years. (A biographico-political footnote: in the late

(**Murdoch** *continued on page 2*)

Peasant Suicides in India

By Robert Pollin

Editors' note: In the last issue of CounterPunch we discussed Robert Pollin's pitiless dissection in his new book Contours of Descent (published by Verso) of neoliberal economic policies, as deployed during the Clinton and now Bush administrations. Few applications of those economic policies had a more melancholy consequence than in south-central India.

In November 1997, reports began ap pearing that hundreds of cotton-farm ing peasants in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh, a state in the Southern Central part of India, had committed suicide because of their inability to repay their debts to moneylenders and traders. The suicide pattern then spread, first to other agricultural areas in India, then to both handloom and powerloom weavers in the textile industry, whose economic circumstances had also deteriorated badly in this same period. Poor farmers have also undergone operations in recent years to remove kidneys and other organs, which they then sell to help cover their debts. Official estimates of the number of suicides in Andrhra Pradesh alone are about 1000. Other credible reports set this figure significantly higher.

What is the connection between the ascendancy of neoliberal economic policies and this wave of desperate actions by individuals in India? At one level, of course, any decision to commit suicide is a personal act that cannot be generalized in broad political terms. Most people do not commit suicide even when economic circumstances become hopeless. Still, given that the suicides (and organ sales) have taken place in waves among people in similar economic circumstances, and that these circumstances were heavily affected by dramatic shifts in economic policy, it is certainly reasonable to inquire as to broad connections between neoliberalism in India and the suicide wave.

Neoliberalism in India

Structural adjustment policies were introduced in India in 1991. Prabhat Patnaik and C.P. Chandrashakar of Jawaharlal Nehru University report that the main features of this new policy regime included a regime of "liberal imports," a progressive removal of administrative controls, including a move to "free markets" in foodgrains and a whittling down of food subsidies, a strictly limited role for public investment, the privatization of publicly owned assets over a wide field, an invitation to multinational corporations to undertake investment in infrastructure under a guaranteed rate of return, and financial liberalization that would do away with all priority sector lending and subsidized credit.

From the time of India achieving independence in 1948 until 1991, the country had pursued a state-directed economic development strategy, with a highly interventionist state, and a large public sector, especially in areas of infrastructure and basic industry. The switch to a much more free-market oriented economy was therefore a major transition for India, akin to the economic policy reversals away from central planning that occurred in Eastern Europe and China.

India's transformation to a neoliberal regime is widely recognized as having stimulated a new era of faster economic

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(**Murdoch** *continued from page 1)*

1960s I shared billing with him as one of the four helmsmen of the London-based Free Communications Group, whose manifesto about the media and democracy was set forth in the first issue of our very occasional periodical, The Open Secret. (The other two helmsmen were Gus McDonald, latterly a Blair-ennobled Labor enforcer in the House of Lords, and Neal Ascherson, most recently the author of an interesting book, Stone Voices: The Search for Scotland.)

I talked to Page about his book in London in mid-November in the midst of the twin invasions of Bush and Murdoch, the latter briefly alighting in London to crush a rising by some shareholders in British Sky Broadcasting who had been claiming that the company was being run by Murdoch as a private fiefdom in a manner injurious to their interests.

It was a characteristic Murdoch performance, marked by his usual arrogance, thuggery and deception. In one particularly spectacular act of corporate contempt he first told the shareholders at the AGM that Tony Ball, moved over to make way for Murdoch's son James, had received no severance payment, and then revealed briefly thereafter that £10 million was being paid to Ball to make sure he would not compete with Sky's now non-existent rivals. The true function of the £10 million is more likely to ensure Ball's future discretion since the latter knows the whereabouts of many bodies whose disinterment might inconvenience Murdoch, throwing an unpleasing light on Sky's unfettered (by Blair's regulators) use of its Thatcher-derived monopoly.

Amid his rampages at BSkyB Murdoch gave an interview to the BBC in which he placed Tony Blair on notice that the loyalty of Murdoch's newspapers was not to be taken for granted.

Referring to himself respectfully in the first person plural, Murdoch was kind enough to intimate that,

"we will not quickly forget the courage of Tony Blair" but then made haste to emphasize that he also enjoys friendly relations with the new Tory leader Michael Howard.

On the mind of this global pirate is a topic in which one would have thought he would have had scant interest, namely national sovereignty. Murdoch professed himself exercised by the matter of the EU constitution. Slipping on the mantle of Britishness, Murdoch pronounced that "I don't like the idea of any more abdication of our sovereignty in economic affairs or anything else."

The Guardian found this altogether too brazen and editorialized the following Monday that "Rupert Murdoch is no more British than George W. Bush. Once upon a time, it's true, he was an Australian with Scottish antecedents. But some time ago he came to the view that his citizenship was an inconvenience and resolved to change it for an American passport. He does not live in this country and it is not clear that he is entitled to use 'we' in any meaningful sense of shared endeavor. To be lectured on sovereignty by someone who junked his own citizenship for commercial advantage is an irony to which Mr Murdoch is evidently blind."

Then the Guardian got a bit rougher: "Readers have to be put on notice that the view expressed in Murdoch titles have not been freely arrived at on the basis of normal journalistic considerations."

This brings me back to Page's book, whose core thesis is that Murdoch offers his target governments a privatized version of a state propaganda service, manipulated without scruple and with no regard for truth. His price takes the form of vast government favors such as tax breaks, regulatory relief, monopoly markets and so forth. The propaganda is undertaken with the utmost cynicism, whether it's the stentorian fake populism and soft porn in the UK's Sun and News of the World, or shameless bootlicking of the butchers of Tiananmen Square.

Murdoch offers his target governments a privatized version of a state propaganda service, manipulated without scruple and with no regard for truth.

I asked Page if he thought this a fair summary.

Page: Your précis of my argument is exact. It may be worth noting that reviewers of *Archipelago* drawn from the still-persistent Old Fleetstrasse culture have (in the words of my old colleague Lew Chester) produced 'innumerable contortions devised to miss its main argument'. Peter Preston stated that 'Bruce' (we are not on first-name terms) failed to offer any thesis of how it was all done. Similarly Anthony Howard, who of course has worked many years under the Murdoch banner. You may recall the first three paragraphs of the book:

"Rupert Murdoch denies quite flatly that he seeks or deals in political favours. 'Give me an example!' he cried in 1999 when William Shawcross interviewed him for Vanity Fair. 'When have we ever asked for anything?'

"Shawcross didn't take up the challenge. Rather, he endorsed Murdoch's denial, by saying that Rupert had never lied to him.

"We can show that Murdoch was untruthful—and Shawcross far too tolerant, both in the interview and in his weighty biography of Murdoch. Not only has Murdoch sought and received political favours: most of the critical steps in the transmutation of News

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Limited, his inherited business, into present-day Newscorp were dependent on such things. Nor is there essential change in his operations as the new century gets under way, and he prepares his sons to extend the dynasty."

I worked quite hard with the Simon & Schuster lawyers to make this so blunt as to show that anyone missing the point was practicing voluntary astigmatism.

On sovereignty: my belief is that Murdoch and his like deeply fear every kind of collaboration between effective democratic entities. They can exist only in an offshore domain from which they truck and barter with comprador elites. Sadly for them, there is an antagonistic tendency which every now and then makes crucial advances: if and when the OECD countries organise a viable tax system, Newscorp is toast. The US and the EC have made more progress in that direction than is generally realised. Only crooks really like offshore, and crooks have no guaranteed monopoly over the world.

Murdoch's ludicrous remarks on the BBC are a reminder that the whole brood constitute a black hole for irony: as does the coronation of his son James. Murdoch rarely takes part in open democratic processes, as the results are too chancy for him. But the Australian referendum on the monarchy struck him as a sure thing, so he plunged in taking his boys with him. Now the failure of that campaign involved many complexities, but its root cause was that while the Oz working-class tradition (colour it Irish) has no great love for Mrs Windsor, it also doesn't think she has done much harm. But these same traditionalists noted that many riders on the republican bandwagon were practiced class malefactors, Rupert conspicuously so. In wonderful evidence of this, another of Murdoch's sons, Lachlan, stated that he could not see the justice of a system (i.e. monarchy) in which you got a job through inheritance alone.

The Oz character has flaws like any other, but it is nearly impossible to be an Australian and have so devastating an incapacity for self-mockery.

When I was asked in various TV and radio spots for comments on the James/BSkyB business, there was usually some question of whether there was abuse of power involved. My answer was to say yes, of course this is pure abuse of power. But such abuse is Newscorp's product: it's what the company sells. The purchasers, of course, are deluded politicians. It's absurd to fancy that Newscorp's internal affairs would be conducted on any other lines.

On one radio show I was put up with a certain Teresa Wise of Accenture (formerly Andersen Consulting, limb of Rupert's defunct auditors). She purported to knot her brow over the question of Newscorp's governance, and produced one of the true standard lines:

'It's very easy to demonize Mister Murdoch . . .' Into the sagacious pause which would clearly have been followed by a laissez-passer, I managed to insert:

'Can we have a little less of this? It is actually very difficult, and very hard work, to demonize Rupert. This is because he is in fact demonic, and he frightens a great many people in and around the media industries. Nobody should say how easy it is to demonize unless they have some working experience of the process.'

We then had a period of silence from her.

Murdoch often denies he is the world's most powerful media boss. There's a natural discretion in those who have unelected political influence: as their power lacks legitimacy, they prefer it to pass unnoticed. But it goes somewhat further in Murdoch's case. Though his Australian-based News Corporation controls newspapers and broadcasting networks to a unique extent, and the governments of America, Australia, Britain and China treat him with great solicitude, Murdoch considers himself a simple entrepreneur ringed by relentless opponents.

He is in reality the man who for whom Margaret Thatcher set aside British monopoly law so that he could buy The Times and the Sunday Times, and to whom she later handed monopoly-control of British satellite television. His newspapers supported Thatcher with ferocious zeal — but switched eagerly to Tony Blair's side once it was clear that New Labour would leave Murdoch in possession of the marketplace advantages bequeathed by conservative predecessors. But Murdoch (who likes a royal plural) says: 'We are . . . not about protectionism through legislation and cronyism . . . '

In similar transactions, Ronald Reagan's right-wing administration let Murdoch dynamite US media laws and set up the Fox network and a left-wing Australian administration let him take monopoly control of the country's newspaper market. But to Murdoch, who thinks himself a victim of 'liberal totalitarians', this is no less than he deserves. He observes no connection between the business concessions governments award to Newscorp and the support Newscorp affords to such benefactors — deep subservience in the case of China's totalitarian elite: 'We are about daring and doing for ourselves' he believes.

Cockburn: But surely he retains some sense of irony, of cynicism, when he professes such nonsense?

The propaganda is undertaken with the utmost cynicism, whether it's the stentorian fake populism and soft porn in the UK's Sun and News of the World, or bootlicking of the butchers of Tiananmen Square.

Page: In Alice in Wonderland the White Queen says she can believe 'six impossible things before breakfast', but Murdoch easily outdoes her. Sigmund Freud's grandson Matthew, a celebrated London public-relations man, is married to Rupert's daughter Elisabeth and has said with surprise that his father-in-law actually believes the stuff in his own newspapers.

We may be sure Mr Freud is not so credulous. Nor are most people who know Newscorp's publications. The London *Sun* coins money. But opinion-surveys show less than one in seven readers trust what it says (however diverting).

In legend Murdoch has an infallible popular touch, displayed in

(**Murdoch** *continued on page 5)*

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(**India** *continued from 1*)

growth. In fact, India's economic growth did accelerate after the 1970s, but this mostly occurred in the 1980s, the decade before the country embarked on its neoliberal restructuring program. Moreover, as C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh of Nehru University have recently documented, the primary factors stimulating growth in the 1980s were a growing fiscal deficit and increased borrowing from foreigners, neither of which were sustainable engines of growth on their own. Growth did then slow substantially in the 1990s, especially in the second half of the decade. This is precisely when the longer-term benefits of the country's neoliberal reforms were supposed to have taken hold.

In terms of agriculture specifically, the major effects of structural adjustment have been to eliminate tariff protections; reduce subsidies on fertilizers, irrigation, seeds, electricity, and procurement; cut infrastructure investments in irrigation and agricultural extension services; promote investments in commercial and high technology agriculture such as horticulture, floriculture, and agro-processing with a view of expanding export markets; and cut credit subsidies to small-scale, domestic farmers while increasing them for exports.

Effects of Neoliberal Agricultural Policies on Peasant Farmers.

The impact of this shift in policy hit India's small farmers from several angles. First, prices of dryland staple products in India, including rice, wheat, and coarse cereals, fell sharply from the mid-1990s onward. For example, the price of rice fell by 28 percent between 1995-99, and the price of wheat fell by 54 percent between 1996-2000.

These price declines in India were due to three factors: corresponding drops in the world prices of staples, sharp cuts in price supports for India's agricultural products, and the opening of India's agricultural-goods market to low-priced imports. While sharp price declines rendered the cultivation of staple crops less viable, the government cuts in developmental spending led concurrently to a collapse of non-agricultural job opportunities. As documented by Prof. Utsa Patnaik of Jawaharlal Nehru University, the growth of overall rural employment in India fell from an average annual rate of 2.0 percent in the 1980s to 0.6 percent in the 1990s.

All the farmers in Andhra Pradesh who committed suicide were growing cotton or other commercial crops. By foregoing the cultivation of staple food crops, they made themselves and their families more vulnerable to experiencing food shortages if their earnings from growing cotton were insufficient. And in fact, along with the prices of the staple crops, cotton prices in India did also fall sharply over this period, by 47 percent between 1994 and 2000.

At the same time, cultivation of cotton required more expenditure on seeds, fertilizer, pesticides and electricity than was the case with staple crops. But the costs of these agricultural inputs rose sharply because of the reductions in government subsidies. Thus, the peasants were forced to borrow heavily from private moneylenders to maintain their supply of inputs. They also had to borrow to lease land. In addition, since the cultivation of cotton entailed more time for spraying fertilizer and pesticides, both male and female farmers were forced to lengthen their working day.

The reduction of the government's infrastructural investments also then meant less public investments for irrigation and less control of crop-damaging pests. This had severe consequences. A survey of the Andhra Pradesh suicide cases showed that 83 percent of their land holdings were not irrigated. As for pest control, many peasants cultivated cotton continuously in order to generate sufficient cash to pay back their debts. But once cotton was cultivated continuously, rather than in rotation with other crops, the pests survived from one planting cycle to the next.

This situation then led the peasants to apply excessive amounts of pesticides, which they obtained by borrowing more. But even here, many of the pesticides were spurious, so much so that there were numerous cases of peasants who attempted suicide by drinking pesticide, but still survived. Such widespread fraud in pesticide sales became possible only by the sharp cuts in agricultural services and staff, an important part of whose job had been to check the quality of agricultural inputs being used by peasants. By the mid-1990s, agricultural extension services in Andhra Pradesh provided only 39 field officers to cover 1,100 villages.

The cuts in government support for credit, seeds, fertilizer and pesticides created a large gap in the supply of needed provisions that was then filled by private businesses —i.e. the private landlords, money lenders, and merchants selling fertilizers, pesticides and seeds. The private business people in agriculture in turn were able to increase their market power by bundling the various products they supplied into larger packages. The same people, in other words, were the seed and pesticide dealers, landlords and money lenders. As such, as Vamsicharan Vakulabharanam of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst argues, even if cotton prices were to rise, the revenues from these higher prices would be claimed almost entirely by intermediaries rather than the cotton farmers themselves. Vakulabharanam refers to this situation as "poverty-inducing growth".

"The current radiological response system is not adequate to protect the people from an unacceptable dose of radiation in the event of a release from Indian Point."

Overall then, it is not difficult to see how this combination of circumstances had created situations of desperate indebtedness for large numbers of poor farmers. But the tragedy of the situation becomes much more vivid when we read some individual accounts. The following stories were compiled from the Indian press by the Radical Union for Political Economy in Bombay and published in the 1998 pamphlet, "What the Peasant Suicides Tell Us".

Accounts of Suicides

"35-year-old Chittadi Madhav Reddy was once a worker in a sports goods manufacturing company in Hyderabad. Three years ago, the company declared a lockout, and Madhav Reddy was forced to shift to his village, Pathipaka…with his wife and children. He was desperate to earn, but he had too little land, just one acre. (**India** *continued bottom of page 5*)

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"Murdoch and his like deeply fear every kind of collaboration between effective democratic entities. They can exist only in an offshore domain from which they truck and barter with comprador elites."

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escalating circulations. But the legend misleads somewhat: Murdoch is not commercially invincible in areas where governments can't help. The plinth of his British empire, the rigorously prurient News of the World, was selling more than six million copies when he bought it: since, half its sales have vanished, while other papers have gained. The New York Post consistently loses money, and most companies would close it.

There are many curiosities — political, editorial, financial, fiscal—— about Newscorp's media ascendancy. But central to it is the psychology of the Murdoch family, and the credulousness Matthew Freud diagnosed. Murdoch is the man who promoted the 'diaries' of Adolf Hitler, and today believes in Saddam Hussein's Weapons of Mass Destruction — scarcely more real, though the two dictators indeed share attributes.

For politicians in Beijing, Washington and London this psychology makes Mr Murdoch an ideal media ally. They have illusions to peddle: Murdoch may be relied on to believe, and try to persuade others. Beijing, for instance, asserts that China cannot prosper except by accepting totalitarian Communist rule —ignoring, therefore the Party's matchless record of criminal incompetence. Rupert's achievements here are notorious, but those of his son James hardly less. James' speech celebrating in Rupert's presence the 'strong stomach' which enables them both to admire Chinese repressive technique shocked even the rugged investors hearing it.

It appears that Rupert considers James his successor, planning to give him command of BSkyB, the British satellite-TV broadcaster which Newscorp wants to link into a worldwide system. Such an advance in media power will require much political aid —that of the Bush administration particularly, and there is no supporter of Mr Bush and his wars who can outdo Rupert's enthusiasm.

Cockburn: It's awful to think that we have younger Murdochs on hand to plague the planet for a few more decades.

Page: Such psychology is a family tradition. Rupert inherited the basis of Newscorp from his Australian father Sir Keith Murdoch, a great propagandist in 1914-18 (the'golden age of lying'). Purportedly an independent war-correspondent, Keith Murdoch acted in fact as political agent to Billy Hughes, his country's wartime prime minister, plotting with him to conscript thousands of young men into a bloodbath supervised by incompetent British generals.

The plot narrowly failed— as did an anti-Semitic intrigue against the Australian general John Monash, whose volunteer divisions broke the German line. Details are an Australian concern, but we should note the success with which Rupert's father later posed as an heroic rebel rescuing young men from ruthless generals: a pioneer feat of spin-doctoring and truth-inversion. Rupert's media still sustain his father Keith's mythology ('the journalist who stopped a war'). The son, born in 1931, has always lived in the shadow of a spurious hero, uncritically promoted.

Just such narratives characterize the 'authoritarian personality', identified by Theodore Adorno, and refined by later psychologists. Growth requires us all to make terms with our parents' real qualities —good or bad — and where that process fails, authoritarian qualities appear: intolerance of relationships other than dominion or submission, and intolerance of the ambiguity which equal

(**Murdoch** *continued on page 6*)

(**India** *continued from page 4*)

So he took another two acres on lease and borrowed heavily. Unfortunately, like so many others in Telangana, he found his entire crop wiped out by pests. He attempted to commit suicide on December 18, 1997. His neighbors quickly detected the attempt and rushed him to the hospital. He survived to his regret.

"Shayamala Mallaiah, 35, was an agricultural laborer who owned just one acre. He took on lease (for 6,000 Rupies) an additional two acres of fallow land, without an irrigation well. Mallaiah borrowed 70,000 Rupies at a monthly interest rate of three percent for purchasing a pair of bullocks, a card, pesticides, fertilizers, and payment of the lease amount. However, 90 percent of his crop was lost. After his suicide, the children …were separated from their destitute mother and sent to the social welfare hostel as part of the Government's 'relief' package.

"A. Narsoji, 45…owned moneylenders [an amount] equal to two-and-a-half-years' earnings in good harvests. But his crop had failed, he had already sold his two oxen to repay one loan and had nothing more to offer moneylenders who were hounding him. Larger and larger doses of pesticide failed to kill the pests that ravaged his cotton crop. Finally, Marsoji himself consumed the pesticide on January 25, 1998 and killed himself." CP

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(**Murdoch** *continued from page 5*)

standing implies. Such characteristics in Murdoch are shown by the testimony of many Newscorp veterans. Executives — editors especially — are ejected, regardless of quality, at a flicker of independence. Murdoch demands internally the same subservience he offers to outside power.

Conformity is enforced by mind-games like Murdoch's notorious telephone-calls — coming to his executives at random moments, and consisting on his own part chiefly of brooding silence. The technique generates fear, and those who rebel against it are swiftly removed.

Authoritarians often possess charm — or skill in flattery. But a strong component is swift, apparently decisive judgment: 'premature closure', or jumping to conclusions. This explains the credulousness Adorno found in authoritarians, for penetrating complex truths usually demands some endurance of ambiguity.

Cockburn: If the authoritarian personality is unsuited to realistic news-gathering, how has Murdoch achieved media pre-eminence?

Page: Journalists are insecure, because they must trade in the unknown. Their profession, said the sociologist Max Weber is uniquely 'accident-prone'. Good management may reduce this insecurity'— but the Newscorp style actually uses insecurity as a disciplinary tool. And the seeming assurance of the authoritarian has tactical benefits: Murdoch can swap one attitude for another with zero embarrassment, and it enables him to 'deliver' newspapers to any power he approves of. Readers naturally grow sceptical. But this does not yet harm Newscorp's business model.

It would have been remarkable for Rupert to develop in non-authoritarian fashion, given his inheritance. When his father died he had neither graduated from university, nor gained any real newspaper tradecraft. In order to take control of what was then News Limited, under the trust Sir Keith established, Rupert had to accept his father as a paragon of journalistic integrity: to convince the trustees, believers in that myth, of his desire to emulate it. Exactly when independence is essential for personal and professional development, a spurious parental image descended on him. And he has emulated the political propagandist, not the mythological paragon.

"Finding themselves distrusted, politicians turn to for a cure to tabloid journalism — Murdoch's especially— which they realise is distrusted still more than themselves."

The outcome attracts today's politicians because a sickness afflicts them. In all developed societies trust in politics has declined: while democracy advances in the developing world, it finds itself ailing in its homelands.. Finding themselves distrusted, politicians turn to for a cure to tabloid journalism— Murdoch's especially— which they realise is distrusted still more than themselves. They do so just as victims of a slow, fatal disease use quack medicines if the real cure still seems too strenuous.

The real problem of politics is the increasingly complex, and therefore occult nature of advanced society. We fancy it has become more open, and it somewhat has. But progress has fallen behind the needs of better-educated, less deferential citizens whose problems grow more daunting intellectually. The state for which politicians are responsible cannot explain itself to its citizens,

It might reverse-change this by opening itself far more freely to scrutiny. But against this the bureaucrats —public and private — on whom politicians rely for administrative convenience conduct relentless guerrilla attack. Should politicians choose to fight back, they will not lack allies, for most Western societies still have some competent, independent news-media and the demand exists among citizens. In Britain real newspapers, and broadcasters like the BBC continue to be trusted as Murdoch's tabloids will never be. But quack remedies still appeal to governments: and all Murdoch asks in return is a little help in extending his monopolies.

Of course if the process goes far enough, only the quack remedy will be available, and democracy's ailment would then be terminal. CP

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